

**WASHINGTON** – During a meeting with the Apostolic Administrator of Pyongyang for the Catholic Church and victims of divided Korean families, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) today announced major progress in a bipartisan effort to reunite Korean-Americans with family in North Korea.

Kirk, co-chair of the bipartisan Congressional Commission on Divided Families, said more than 1,000 families have come forward to report family in North Korea, with more than 100 from the Chicago area. The Commission, made up of 10 Republicans and Democrats, is working with the Eugene Bell Foundation to document cases of divided families and urge the North Korean government to allow these families to unite.

"All too often we forget the human face of North Korea and the devastating impact the regime's policies have taken on ordinary Korean-Americans," said Kirk, the only member of Congress to travel to every province in North Korea. "Now more than 50 years since the Korean conflict divided a nation, Republicans and Democrats are working together to reunite constituents with loved ones in North Korea."

As a leader in the Korean reunification movement, Cardinal Nicholas Cheong praised the Commission's progress and the Eugene Bell Foundation for their efforts to reunite Korean families. Cardinal Cheong serves as the archbishop of Seoul and apostolic administrator of Pyongyang.

"I am very happy to learn about the newly established Congressional Commission on Divided Families and to hear first-hand from Congressman Kirk about the Commission's hopes to help Korean-Americans reunite with their relatives in North Korea," Cardinal Nicholas Cheong said. "We are very thankful to the U.S. Congress for this humanitarian support and I am glad I will have a chance to explain to my counterparts in South Korea about this positive development. I am also grateful to Congressman Kirk for giving me a chance to tell him about our efforts in Korea."

According to the Congressional Research Service, between 100,000 and 500,000 Korean-Americans still have family living in North Korea. Most have not seen their loved ones since the end of the Korean War, while many have not seen family members since World War II.

The Congressional Commission on Divided Families is the first official mechanism inside the U.S. government to directly engage with the North Korean government on the issue of family reunification.

In the absence of diplomatic relations between the two countries, elderly Korean-Americans are forced to contact relatives without the protection of a U.S. embassy or the State Department. Families are at the mercy of the black market smuggling rings that control access to North Korea.

Congressman Kirk and Cardinal Cheong were joined by victims of divided families, including 66-year-old Chicagoan Cha-hee Stanfield. Ms. Stanfield was five years old when she last saw her father and older brother.

“At this juncture of separated family history, witnessing the Cardinal join in our issue and bless our efforts and dedication to the Korean community is simply overwhelming,” Cha-hee Stanfield said. “On behalf of all separated families, I am also grateful to the Korean-American Catholic Church community and Congressman Kirk for making this historical event happen.”